

Vallejo in Paris: The Poet as Journalist

When César Vallejo left Peru for Paris in 1923 he was thirty-one years old with two books of poetry to his name. *Trilce* had appeared the year before and disconcerted critics with its stark innovations and the raw force of its language; only gradually did other poets, notably in Spain, recognize its importance. Vallejo spent fifteen years in Paris where he died, but he never published another book of poems in his lifetime.

What he did manage to publish was mostly journalism. Soon after arriving in Paris he became a correspondent for newspapers in Peru, ultimately contributing to over thirty journals in Latin America and Europe, predominantly through the 1920s. He wrote some three hundred articles and chronicles, covering social and cultural topics ranging from the Salon d'Automne and profiles of artists to fashion, sports (especially tennis), spiritism (Krishnamurti), and curiosities from the European newspapers, reflecting the habits of both Europeans and Latin Americans. His own cultural identity remained a central concern, particularly in the context of Europe, and he continued to question that relationship while engaging himself fully with the issues of his time. Eventually his long-standing preoccupation with social injustice rose to the fore and by the end of the decade it became his primary subject. Above all, this body of reportage and reflections served as his "writer's workshop," as Jorge Puccinelli points out, where Vallejo could elaborate his ideas on art and politics, while continuing to write in various genres.

Desde Europa (Lima: Ediciones Fuente de Cultura Peruana, 1987) gathers nearly all of Vallejo's articles from Paris—he also published several pieces before leaving Peru—together with numerous photos, illustrations, maps and facsimiles of letters and newspaper pages. The book represents an enormous work of scholarship that occupied Puccinelli for many years. His purpose was to reintegrate this material so that the poet's better-known

the Argentine writer Alejandro Sux (back in 1912 Sux had helped found *Mundial Magazine* in Paris, not to be confused with the later Peruvian journal, and proposed Rubén Darío as its editor). Despite the grand designs of the enterprise, which Vallejo announced in his first piece for *Mundial*, the work was not as steady as he had hoped. Mostly it consisted of running the office, but operations seldom ran smoothly; for his own reasons—his health, on one occasion, plus more promising commitments—Vallejo took several brief leaves of absence before resigning two years later. In October of 1925 he also began receiving a small monthly stipend for a few years from the Spanish government—thanks to the persistent efforts of his friend Pablo Abril de Vivero, the Peruvian poet and diplomat based in Madrid. Ostensibly the grant was for Vallejo to finish his law studies in Madrid, abandoned earlier in Peru: all he did was take the train there every month or two to pick up his check.

The following year he was involved in founding a couple of publications as well. *La Semaine Parisienne* never got past the planning stages, but Vallejo devoted a number of letters to the subject in his extensive correspondence with Abril. Together they intended to start a twelve-page weekly and hoped to attract an impressive list of contributors among French and Latin American writers; he wrote to Abril that Montherlant would give an article for the first issue. Vallejo even went so far as to quit his job temporarily at Les Grands Journaux and to open an office for the new journal, but without money he couldn't advance the project. Meanwhile his friend Juan Larrea, the Spanish poet, launched a small literary journal, *Favorables París Poema*, in which Vallejo took part distributing hundreds of copies. He contributed a couple of brief texts about poetry—"Poesía Nueva" and "Se prohíbe hablar al piloto" ("A poem is a vital entity that is much more organic than an organic being in nature. . . if you amputate a line, a word, a letter, a written sign from a poem, it dies. . .")—but the journal folded after two issues.

Vallejo seemed to truly enjoy stretching out in his longer chronicles, linking together the most unlikely elements till the end might be anyone's guess. He remained constantly aware of the social undercurrents of events and cast an ironic glance at politicians and those who thought themselves in control. In "Crónica de París" from 1925 he begins by questioning the sources of liberalism, arguing rather for eastern philosophies which spread their wisdom by way of a certain intolerance and a sacred sectarian passion. He then shifts to the story of Chinese students in Paris uniting in solidarity with striking workers in Shanghai, while pointing up the harsh conditions at the Shanghai mills belonging to French and English companies. The piece moves on to tell of the aristocracies of fashion in a gala evening at the Grand Palais, mysterious threats against the event, the ploys of publicity-seeking industrialists, and more, ending finally in an account of

the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen whose plane got lost at the North Pole: from every corner the questions multiplied, what happened to him, till some days later he returned alive and indeed nothing at all had happened to him.

Fashion amused him to no end, there in the capital of fashion—for its inherent folly and the lengths to which people will go to follow its call. In "El verano en Deauville," also from 1925, he describes how the seaside resort is in vogue because of the Parisian artists who reign there. Their dress that season then brings to mind a long episode about an escaped leopard in the Bois de Boulogne near Paris, how the whole city is caught up in the madcap chase for days, when at last it is found and shot, leading to protests and, immediately, the fashion for leopard-skin shoes. By the fall it becomes transformed into the Leopard Dance at the Moulin Rouge.

"Brilliant and cruel city" he calls Paris in the same piece, for it has failed to appreciate the work of George Bernard Shaw, who in turn is quoted for his remarks on the city's intense provincialism. Later that year he returns to his defense of Shaw—French critics consider Pirandello the better playwright, but Vallejo judges him more a technical innovator while Shaw clearly "possesses a humanism lacking in the other writer" ("La conquista de París por los negros"). To the end, despite his increasing political engagement, Vallejo will remain too much the humanist to let his esthetic judgments fall under the complete sway of Marxist dogma.

As for his attention to the stage, beyond its interest as a subject for his columns, Vallejo showed an ongoing concern with theater from his perspective as a writer. He chides the French for producing mostly mediocre work, and for knowing nothing of new Russian or German theater. He considers Cocteau essentially a fake, and when his "Orphée" opens in 1926, Vallejo writes: "At heart Cocteau is a conservative, in spite of his efforts and modernist poses. His attitudes are based on makeup; his acrobatics are clownish, that is, false. Inside, sleep the old spirit and substance. . . in truth, he is, will be, and has been, a Catholic" ("La visita de los reyes de España a París"). Three years later, reporting on theater trends, he dismisses the realism of boulevard theater, and in praising the Russians is especially excited by the plastic quality of their work; among the French, he only cares about the more innovative directors, such as Charles Dullin, Jacques Copeau, and Georges Pitoëff. It was in the path of their work that he hoped to go with the several plays he started writing at the end of the decade, in an effort to merge his creative concerns with social and political material, to reach a broader audience. For a moment Dullin was interested, and García Lorca tried to help get him a production in Madrid. He had thought at least to make some money from this work, but he never saw any of his plays produced. Late in his life he even wrote film scripts from two of his plays, yet nothing happened with these either.

writings could be viewed in their total context. He notes Vallejo's fondness for coining words and phrases ("de una sencillez casi vegetal," "la hiena fosforosa del destino") much as in the poetry, and on at least two occasions Vallejo quotes directly from *Trilce* in his articles. At times the journalism serves as a trial run for the more creative work—the prose poem "Hallazgo de la Vida," for example, first appeared in 1926 as a slightly longer piece for a newspaper in Trujillo, the provincial capital where Vallejo had gone to school. Though critics have been aware of the journalism, Puccinelli was apparently the first to unearth the work from Vallejo's early years in Paris, written for another paper in Trujillo, the six-page daily *El Norte*, founded by the poet's friends.

Vallejo wrote his first piece the month he reached Paris, in July. His semi-regular series of three dozen chronicles for *El Norte* was called "Desde Europa," and it began with "En Montmartre," which tells of his encounter with an Andalusian on the Champs Elysées who recognizes he is from America and takes him to Montmartre to show him around. Vallejo describes how the scene there is fading and that now the action is in Montparnasse. The Andalusian insists more than once that "Europe is finished," and asks Vallejo why he's bothered to come. "I am a worker from Peru," the poet tells him. "I wanted to see the old continent."

Judging from his earliest articles, Vallejo was apparently quick to learn French. He seems hardly dazzled, however, by the vast metropolis; rather he is always ready to challenge what he sees. Describing a new production of Maeterlinck's celebrated play, *L'Oiseau bleu*, he tells how both critics and public raved, then tears it apart as garish and ridiculous. With a certain irony he comments on the new inductions at the Académie Française, an institution that repeatedly provokes his amusement. When he writes on the popular Montparnasse café La Rotonde, a spot that he frequented, he is impressed by its company—the Japanese painter Foujita, an actress from Pitoëff's theater, Enrique Gómez Carrillo along with Maeterlinck, as well as Tzara and "the whole dadaist squad"—and yet he has fun with it. But he makes his first serious charge late in 1923, in "Cooperación," where he tells of a Peruvian evening at a Paris theater, with a lecture on the Incas, poetry readings (including himself and José Santos Chocano, of the previous generation), a concert, and a talk by the Peruvian minister to France. The entire Peruvian colony attends, to share their culture with the French, and Vallejo laments: "Solidarity? Understanding? Nothing of the sort exists in Europe with respect to Latin America. We offer our hearts to Europe. . . and Europe responds with silence and a premeditated deafness." Why does Europe scorn us, fear us, remain ignorant of us, he asks, warning that recognition must come: "We the barbarians are here!"

His columns for *El Norte* averaged once a month through the end of 1924, and that year half were devoted to sketches of older Latin American

writer/diplomats whom he visited in Paris. Among these were two chroniclers active since the turn of the century, with strong ties to the French literary establishment: Gómez Carrillo, the Guatemalan writer who had been friendly with Rubén Darío and was perhaps the most translated in his time, and Ventura García Calderón, one of four brothers from a conservative Peruvian family who had all moved to Paris; Francisco García Calderón, the essayist, was profiled as well by Vallejo. He also wrote on the Ecuadorian critic Gonzalo Zaldumbide, the Bolivian Alcides Arguedas, and the Uruguayan Hugo Barbagelata, editor of *L'Amérique Latine*, a short-lived journal in French and Spanish. Vallejo had contributed an essay there on new Peruvian writers, in which he showed a keen sense of the problems confronting his generation, who were digesting a full range of foreign influences even as they produced "substantial works that are genuinely South American."

In other pieces of the time Vallejo comments on the incredible resourcefulness of French vanity, another recurring theme—how every instinct and institution is geared toward vaunting French achievements. The urge to publicize the national glory is second nature: "The moment a French person feels or dreams anything important, they leap into the street right away with it" ("Réclame de culture"). In "Las Mujeres de Paris" he notes that for a "new worlder" visiting Paris what strikes him above all is the scarcity of children. The low birth rate in France then brings him to consider the "strange impression of sterility" in the women he sees, with their cold grins, and how perhaps they become denatured by sharing the same workaday struggles as men.

Journalism was Vallejo's main source of income in Paris, but the newspapers often did not pay promptly—through the years he sometimes had to borrow money from friends. Not until 1925 did he begin to find enough work, when the Lima journal *Mundial* hired him to write a monthly column, which became his most extensive collaboration. In 1926 he was contributing as well to *Variedades*, also of Lima, and for the next several years he was turning out articles on a weekly basis. The larger audiences for these publications enabled him to write pieces that were longer and more wide-ranging. Puccinelli points to a shift in style with this new work: whereas in the first years Vallejo kept in mind the earlier *cronistas* like Gómez Carrillo, seeking *le mot rare* in his use of language, reviving archaic words, now he sought the precision of *le mot juste* to render his language more powerful, taking as a prime example the work of Joseph Conrad.

Besides the increased outlets for his articles, Vallejo's situation grew a bit more secure in 1925 for other reasons. That spring he became secretary at the office of Lee Grands Journaux Ibéro-Américains, a new press agency set up to facilitate contacts between Latin America and Europe. For six months prior to its opening he had campaigned for a job from its founder,

Vallejo wrote intermittently on film, and he was especially fond of Chaplin. "Religiones de vanguardia," early in 1927, recounts the ongoing debate among intellectuals and the public about whether or not cinema exists as an art in its own right. Though he clearly thinks so, he rules out the opinions of writers, actors, directors, as "lacking authority. . . It is very difficult to be this and that, artist and man, at the same time. A man who is an artist can no longer do or say anything connected with art except as an artist. A poet will judge a poem, not as a simple mortal, but as a poet and the same with filmmakers." The following year he devotes an entire piece to Chaplin ("La pasión de Charles Chaplin"). Describing *The Gold Rush* he writes that "the actor, as in none of his other films, is totally absorbed by the character. Good night, señor Pirandello. . ." Moreover, the work marks an ideal synthesis of art and politics: "this film makes the best demand for social justice that any postwar art has been capable of till now." Several months later, he cites Chaplin's comic genius with the mirror scene in *The Circus* as achieving by much simpler means the sort of rhythmic density that Abel Gance attempted with his grand experiment using three screens ("Ensayo de una rítmica en tres pantallas"). Vallejo does not find much beauty in *Napoleon*: "Gance made a film that is cinematically banal, harnessed with brilliant historical reconstructions."

Vallejo wrote more often on art than on cinema. Puccinelli even draws the parallel with Baudelaire, pointing not only to Vallejo's prose poems but also to his "Salons." A small collection could be drawn from these pieces alone, in which he displays a continual curiosity with the artistic questions of his day: "Salón de Otoño," 1923; "Salón de las Tullerías de París," 1924; "El Salón de Otoño de París," 1925; "Picasso or the easy job of the hero," 1927; "Madness in art," 1927; "Juan Gris or the Pythagoras of painting," 1928; "New artistic currents of Spain," 1928; "Latest artistic news from Paris," 1929; "The creators of indo-american painting," 1929; "Tendencies of modern sculpture: the sculptor Fioravanti," 1935; "Man and God in Inca sculpture," 1936. He knew many artists as well: through Larrea he became friendly with Vicente Huidobro, who in turn introduced him to Juan Gris, Picasso, Jacques Lipschitz, and Erik Satie.

Despite his total immersion in Paris, as shown by all the journalistic writing, Vallejo did nonetheless miss his roots. His first trip to Spain, to pick up his stipend late in 1925, awoke a sort of nostalgia in him for a part of his cultural origins. "Without doubt, I am going to my native land," he writes. "I am returning to my Spanish America, reincarnated—by love of the word that spans distances—in Castilian soil, seven times nailed with the nails of all the colonial adventures." On the way there, he stops in Basque country, grateful for his brief respite from the city: "What a pleasure it is to get lost for lack of roads," whereas in the city "I go out to the street and there is street; I take to thinking and there is always thought. But now,

no. . . Ah, my dear Vicente Huidobro, I can't ever agree with the excessive importance you give to the mind in life. My votes are always for feeling." When he reaches Madrid he finds that it is "the most original city in Europe," due to the Pyrenees which protect Spain from the anxiety of progress that besets Paris ("Entre Francia y España"). Vallejo returned to Madrid many times in subsequent years, but its charm for him was even more problematic than Paris. He eventually spent fourteen busy months there in 1930-32, after being kicked out of France for his political activities, yet when he had the chance to return to Paris it came none too soon. He wrote to Larrea a month before arriving back in France: "It's unbearable living here in Madrid. If you're passing through, it may be fine and even enchanting. But to do anything and to live, it's impossible."

In his articles Vallejo often bemoaned the "velocity" of Paris, its obsessive devouring of the new. Worse, due to France's debt to Wall Street, the capital was ceding its place as center of the world to New York. That meant it might take its lead from the United States, a country he decried for its utterly competitive society, its "matchismo" as he termed it in "La Vida Como Match." Still, he appreciated the unique quality of Paris, especially where foreigners were concerned. In effect, Paris contains all the other great Western cities, he writes late in 1926, but where others, such as Buenos Aires, may be a "cosmopolis," Paris is really a "cosmic city": there the colonies of foreigners don't remain simply what they are, rather "they lose their social physiognomy and become Parisian. That is, they adopt the social rhythm of Paris. . . they come not to get rich or amuse themselves a while, but to live more widely and nobly, they come to stay" ("El crepúsculo de las águilas").

That some of the natives should feel overwhelmed amid all the strange tongues seemed understandable to him, though the extreme responses of French pride could not be taken seriously: "There are places in the big city where French is heard in such short supply that one would think it a shy foreign tongue. . . Already one newspaper has insinuated that the government should strictly prohibit any but the national language to be spoken in France." To which he concludes, "It always comes down to choosing, in language as in politics, between the Nation and the International" ("Desde París. La confusión de las lenguas").

Despite his internationalism Vallejo does not lose track of his own cultural origins, nor does he believe that the ultimate goal is to be taken for a European. Responding to the French tendency to claim as much as possible for the national glory (one Frenchman, he notes, even claims that jazz originated there), he counters by reclaiming a part of Paul Gauguin for Peru, whose mother was Peruvian; the painter spent part of his childhood there, and his work always bore its traces. But Vallejo is not trading in national vanities. Rather he chides many of his fellow Latin American artists

precisely for getting it wrong in their relations with Europe, in pretending to be what they are not and not what they are.

He pursues this discourse through various articles, between 1926 and 1928 especially. "I lift my voice and accuse my generation of being impotent to create or to realize its own spirit," he writes ("Contra el secreto profesional"). He describes two classes of Latin American intellectuals in Paris, the official and the nonofficial ones, himself among the latter, and that "we have produced very insignificant things under the cultural aegis of Europe." He proposes instead "works that are rigorously indo-american and pre-columbian," insisting that American folklore, Aztec and Inca in particular, holds revelations for European culture ("Una gran reunión latinoamericana"). Like the people of the orient, "we too have lost our soul and we've lost it for Europe. Because in Latin America the Europeans have ruined everything for us, philosophies, religions, industries, arts. . .since Columbus' arrival there is a terrible emptiness in our life" ("Oriente y Occidente").

On the other hand, Vallejo suggests that most Latin Americans who come to Europe don't stay long enough to really see the changes in the postwar era, or they remain too insulated within their own communities to notice. In Paris there is a new sense of order and method, and he points to the importance of clocks—this is a theme that he returns to often, the legislation of time in an accelerated world. Moreover, the bohemian and anarchist characters from the previous epoch have disappeared ("Las nuevas disciplinas"). He remarks that Latin Americans are often disappointed when they arrive, they claim that Paris is just like home: "We South Americans seem more Parisian (in our ways) than the French themselves who come from the provinces. . .To such a degree has Latin America been culturally and socially colonized by Paris" ("Sociedades coloniales"). By the end of 1928, after the first of his three trips to the Soviet Union, he feels more than ever the need for a new decolonized consciousness. "We have not created anything," he writes. "We haven't even tried. . .When young American intellectuals come to Europe, they don't come to honestly study foreign life and culture, but to 'triumph.' They carry in their suitcases some books or canvases made in America, and barely do they arrive in Paris, no other desire moves them than to 'triumph'" ("La juventud de América en Europa"). Vallejo, by contrast, did come to study, to inquire and criticize, and to put himself in question.

He understood this disadvantaged relationship for Latin America, regarding Europe, all the more in its political sense. In one of his occasional reports on the League of Nations, "Ginebra y las pequeñas naciones," he comments ironically how the League is concerned that various Latin American countries owe it a lot of money: "So that's what it's good for: to collect. It knows no other way to help humanity than the modern benefit

of being a creditor. . .What other ties are there, in effect, between the League of Nations and Nicaragua, but those of creditor and debtor?" In a later piece, discussing the weakness of Latin American diplomacy in representing the problems abroad, he concludes: "What Europe is unaware of is that the indigenous race constitutes. . .the only barrier that is more or less active against all foreign imperialism in Latin America" ("La diplomacia latinoamericana").

During this time Vallejo increasingly wondered how to reconcile his political preoccupations with his work as an artist. In 1926, reflecting on Victor Hugo's books, he asserts that their effect was due largely to their political value. If, instead of all his public activity, "Hugo had closed himself in his room like Mallarmé, he wouldn't have reached the universal influence he had. . .Essentially, the work of Victor Hugo is that of a political ideologue and not of a poet." And he calls Hugo's "an easy and cheap way to become a 'great poet'" ("El poeta y el político. El caso Victor Hugo"). The following year he begins to address what he sees as the social responsibility of the artist, whose neutrality and lack of political sensitivity would rather seem to prove "human mediocrity and esthetic inferiority. But in what sphere should the artist act politically? . . .Above all, he must awaken a new political sensitivity in man. . .and engender new concerns and civic emotions." But contrary to Diego Rivera, who at the time favored an art more closely tied to ideology, Vallejo emphasizes that an artist is a free being who works independently of political programs ("Los artistas ante la política").

By this point in his life Vallejo was beginning to feel ashamed of still living off grants, and he was quite fed up at seeing his literary efforts not amount to much: as with most of his fiction, he couldn't find a publisher for his novella of Peruvian folklore, *Hacia el reino de los sciris*. The day he left for his trip to the Soviet Union in October 1928, financed with a grant from the Peruvian government meant for his return home, he wrote to Pablo Abril that he was anxious about his future, and that "I still have not found my path" in life. He hoped perhaps to stay in Russia, and seemed certain that "in Paris I shall never achieve anything." Yet within two weeks he was on his way back, due not to the cold that he feared but to the language problem. He was greatly excited by the new society he saw, and managed at least to make some contacts to write for newspapers there. More and more he devoted himself to Marxist studies. His old friend José Carlos Mariátegui had recently founded the Communist Party in Peru—and was eventually jailed—while Vallejo frequented these circles with other Peruvians in Paris. Due to his increased political commitment, though, his most regular journals, *Mundial* and *Variedades*, began to balk at the militant tone of his articles and by the end of 1930 he ceased working for them.

That year, in "Autopsia del superrealismo," written after the "Second Manifesto of Surrealism," he criticizes André Breton for being "a scholastic ideologue, an armchair rebel. . . Breton forgets that there is only one revolution, the proletarian, and that the workers will make this revolution with action, not the intellectuals with their 'crisis of consciousness.'" For Vallejo, surrealism's brief fling with Marxism constituted its one truly revolutionary dimension, and its failure to stick to that was a sign of its essentially bourgeois nature. Though it sounds as if he may have at last succumbed, Vallejo couldn't be a Party hack if he tried. He considered Mayakovsky pathetic, "a buffoon," for abandoning the futurism of his youth in a feeble effort to remake himself into a revolutionary poet. Mayakovsky's life and literature couldn't be more divided, as he became lost in trying to readjust to the new social reality ("Un reportaje en Rusia VI: Vladimiro Maiakovsky").

His article on the poet was one of ten that Vallejo wrote about Russia for Abril's new journal in Madrid, *Bolívar*. The pieces were subsequently published as part of *Rusia en 1931*, which quickly went into three printings. It was among his only published books since living in Europe, along with *Tungsten*, his proletarian novel—a tale of suffering indigenous masses and labor organizing in the mines of Peru—which came out in 1931 and also enjoyed some success; the second edition of *Trilce* had been published in Spain, in 1930. Not that they relieved his chronic penury much. Despite some translation work during his stay in Spain (two novels by Marcel Aymé and one by Henri Barbusse), he was unable to publish most of his other writing, except for a few poems in magazines.

His journalistic work dwindled nearly to a halt after that, and he wrote no other pieces on Russia. Of the fifteen articles that he produced until his death in 1938, most were devoted to Peru, especially to Inca art and culture, for European and other Latin American publications. The Marxist tone of his language has largely subsided in these pieces, in favor of more esthetic and historical terms. It was like a final return for Vallejo—intellectually if not physically—to his indo-american core, which had always made up the substance of his fiction.

The few articles of his last year, by contrast, arose out of his anti-imperialist and antifascist stance, in that they were entirely caught up with the Spanish Civil War. When the war broke out in 1936, Vallejo's activism grew particularly focused: he collected funds for the republican cause, attended meetings, denounced nonintervention in his articles, and at the end of the year he even went to Spain for a few weeks to try to help firsthand. In spite of his difficult circumstances, he went back the following year to represent Peru at the International Congress of Antifascist Writers, where he delivered a talk on "The Responsibility of the Writer." This was

the time for his last rush of poems. In the final six months of his life, it appears, he wrote more poetry than he had through all the years in Paris.

—JASON WEISS